Defining Modifiers

Modifiers are words or groups of words that describe and, thereby, offer more information about another word right next to the modifier. In the following sentences, the modifiers are in bold text:

1. I **always** listen to the radio on my way to work.

The word **always** modifies the word **listen** because it offers more information about how often the writer listens to the radio.

2. **Waving goodbye to her family**, Jill began her road trip to Tennessee.

The words waving goodbye to her family modify the word Jill because they offer more information about what Jill was doing as she left for her trip.

3. People **who often clip** coupons save money on groceries.

The words **who often clip coupons** modifies **people** because it identifies which people save money when grocery shopping.

4. For Valentine's Day, Jill gave cookies **with sprinkles** to her class.

The words **with sprinkles** modify the word **cookies** because they give more information about the kind of cookies.

Using Modifiers

Modifiers are great tools for a writer, but they must be placed in the right location. Modifiers should always appear as close as possible to the words that they modify. When modifiers are placed away from the words they modify, readers become confused. These confusing modifiers are called "misplaced modifiers" or "dangling modifiers" since they "dangle" and don't clearly modify what they should be modifying. Consider the following examples:

5. **Waving goodbye to her family, the car** backed out of the driveway, and Jill began her journey.

Because the modifier is placed next to the words **the car**, it sounds as if the car is waving.

CORRECTED: Waving goodbye to her family, Jill backed the car out of the driveway and began her journey.

6. For Valentine's Day, Jill gave cookies to **her class with sprinkles**.

Because the modifier is placed next to the word **class**, it sounds as if Jill's students are covered with sprinkles.

CORRECTED: For Valentine's Day, Jill gave cookies with sprinkles to her class.

7. Robert ran out of the house, **laughing all the way.**

Because the modifier is next to **house**, it sound as if the house is laughing.

CORRECTED: Laughing all the way, Robert ran out of the house.